

Sulkies thrive in Ohio

Harness tracks
still bringing in
crowds, money

By Chris Haft
Post staff reporter

Encyclopedias don't list harness racing as one of Ohio's natural resources. Perhaps they should.

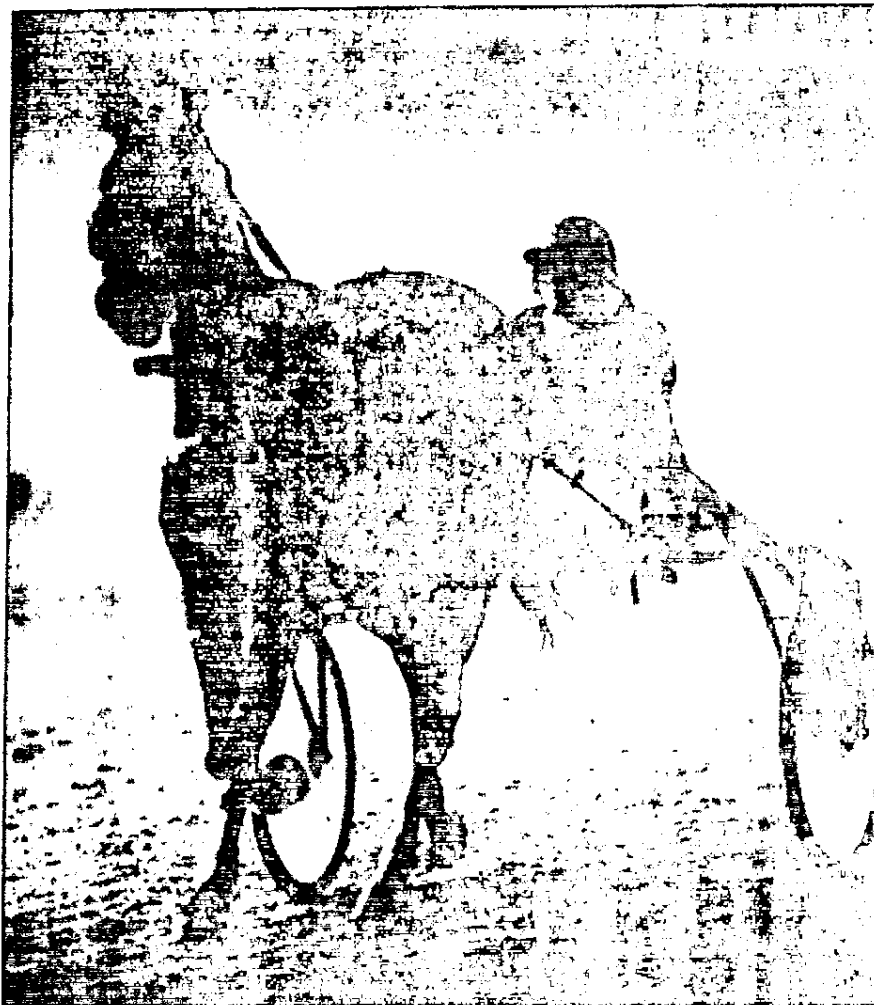
Although the harness racing industry strives to cope with track closures, slumping attendance and sagging handles in prominent areas of the United States, Ohio's four tracks continue to enjoy increasing success. The contrast underscores the fact that harness racing in this state has maintained a steady level of popularity for decades, entertaining patrons at county fairs and metropolitan racetracks alike.

The Buckeye State is a minority in its superiority. According to the United States Trotting Association — located in Columbus, Ohio, fittingly enough — Ohio was just one of two states where harness racing attendance rose in 1986. Kentucky was the other. Ohio also was among five of the 17 states offering harness racing where average handles for all tracks increased.

Besides being a stage, Ohio is also a crib. It leads the nation in the production of standard-bred (trotting and pacing) foals. "It seems like every other farm you run across has a broodmare in the back or stallions or racehorses that compete in fairs," said Thomas Aldrich, general manager of Northfield Park near Cleveland.

Northfield Park led the nation's tracks — thoroughbred or harness — in percentage of increase for both attendance and handle in 1986. Canterbury Downs near Minneapolis dropped harness racing, Garden State Park near Philadelphia ended its program, and Foxboro Raceway near Boston fell into financial disarray, preventing it from gaining any harness racing dates for this year.

Yet Bob Rossilli, executive director of the North American Harness Racing Management Association, maintained, "Harness racing is doing a lot better and is a lot healthier than publicized. I'm not saying it's in an outstanding position on a 10 percent growth trend, but it's not a product that's obsolete."



Bruce Crippen/The Cincinnati Post

As the horses and drivers prepare for a race at Lebanon Raceway (above), Ron Harkless (right) of Chillicothe, Ohio, watches a videotape of the previous one.

Those who consider harness racing a figment of somebody's imagination have probably been seduced by the power of television. The sport receives little of what might be deemed "modern" media coverage.

"The current generation of sportswriters and sportscasters have grown up on television," said Stan Bergstein, executive vice president of Harness Tracks of America. "When I grew up, sportswriters and sportscasters were racetrackers — not to the exclusion of

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everything else, but they went to the track. There has been an aversion to the sport because the people who write and broadcast sports know baseball and football. They're on television all the time."

But enough people know harness racing in Ohio. The state benefits from apparently efficient organization at each track — Northfield Park, Lebanon Raceway in Lebanon, Scioto Downs in Columbus and Raceway Park in Toledo.

These tracks prosper by observing the fundamentals. One is considering the customer.

For example, Bergstein said that Corwin Nixon, 84th district state representative and Lebanon's general manager, "has really refined the art of how to run a small racing meeting. Nobody manages a small track better than he does."

Nixon's secret?

"We give people first-class treatment, and that's the key to it," he said. "You don't want to go anywhere, even the drugstore, unless you're treated right. People see how clean (the facility) is from the time they get in the parking lot."

Northfield places the same emphasis on cleanliness and congeniality. "We have two things that some tracks overlook: an attractive, well-maintained facility and friendly, courteous employees," Aldrich said. "That wasn't always the way at Northfield Park."

Handling finances is another basic skill Ohio tracks have mastered. "Some tracks don't keep costs under control," Aldrich said. "They concentrate more on generating big handles and big attendances that sometimes have a false air to them."

Witness the failure of Garden State, where the daily handle averaged between \$700,000 and

\$800,000 — outstanding, but outnumbered by the \$170 million it cost to build the track. To be sure, harness racing was given undesirable winter racing dates. But as Aldrich pointed out, "It's an hour away from Atlantic City, and the competition for the gambling dollar in that part of the country is the most intense anywhere."

Little competition exists between horsemen and the state racing commission, another major source of harness racing's strength.

"The last eight to 10 years, the cooperation has been very, very good," Nixon said.

"The state really has become a partner with the tracks and the horsemen, and they've all moved forward together," said John Pawlak, publicity director for the U.S. Trotting Association.

"The racing board in Ohio is flexible enough not only to not hamper management, but to give management the opportunity to experiment and pioneer new things," Bergstein said. "That's not true in all states."

The commission, for example, allowed Northfield to institute "Super Bet," in which bettors are asked to pick two perfectas and a trifecta over the fifth, sixth and seventh races. The track designates mandatory payoff from the Super Bet pool on certain nights, which is why Northfield officials needed commission approval before instituting the wagering on Nov. 1, 1985.

The commission also has instituted a tax abatement program, which enables thoroughbred and harness tracks to spend hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars on improving their facilities and ultimately receive a substantial amount of money back.

Summarized Rossilli: "Ohio is very action- and solution-oriented and very constructive. They grasp what is out there, pick what is best for their marketplace and localize it."

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